

Graduation 2002
UCLA Department of Political Science
June 16, 2002

Dr. Lofchie (Loft-chee), distinguished faculty, graduating seniors, parents, families, and friends.

Congratulations, graduates for earning the privilege to be here today. Congratulations to your parents, families, and friends for providing the emotional and financial support you needed on your journey here. And to all of the fathers today -- could there be a more satisfying Father's Day gift than watching your children receive credentials for what we hope will lead to gainful employment?

Over the last four years, you've all been witnesses to an extraordinary time in American history. Since beginning your studies here at UCLA, our country has experienced a number of significant events.

For the second time in our history, a president was impeached by the House of Representatives. A contested presidential election was decided by the Supreme Court. And, for the first time since Benjamin Harrison's election in 1888, a new president was elected by winning the electoral college vote but losing the popular vote.

It is a testament to the strength of our democracy that our nation has taken these remarkable events in stride.

These events, of course, all preceded September 11. You are the first post 9/11 graduating class and you face a sobered world, where many problems seem so overwhelming. I don't believe I know a single person who hasn't reevaluated the world and his or her place in it after those events.

When I was an undergraduate at UCLA, so many students of my generation felt they could do just about anything they put their minds to. Like you, I majored in political science, and I got an excellent education, not just because there were such interesting political science courses, but because of the latitude we had to take classes in other areas of study as well.

At the time, I didn't have future plans to be in public office -- it was only later when a unique opportunity opened up to me that I decided to run for elective office. I knew when I was here, though, that I wanted to be involved in public service and play a part in determining the character and values of our society. Our battles back then were the push for civil rights and to end the war in Vietnam. To be involved in politics was a way to getting things done. To be in public office was to be in a noble profession.

The study of political science introduced us to political theories and taught us there are different ways we can act collectively to achieve differing goals for society.

The American experiment with democracy has to be fostered. After all, it has only been in existence a very short period of time in human history. The norm has been government by dictator, monarch, or a ruling elite.

We can't take our system for granted. We could lose it -- not just because we have enemies -- but through ignorance and complacency among our own people at home who don't feel they need to participate, even by voting.

Our future strength rests on those who have made a choice to be informed and involved. And, when people lose interest or feel they don't make a difference, the void is quickly filled by others who gain more influence and who use that power to enrich themselves or seek a private special interest instead of the public one.

I want to impress upon each of you that you can make a difference. While the enormity of some challenges can make some people not even try, the fact is that one person can be crucial.

In Washington, I have seen a single vote by one congressman make historical decisions. It was only by one vote that we were able to institute an inventory of toxic air pollutants near chemical plants, which led to landmark legislation to regulate those emissions for the first time in 1990 when we saw how much cancer and birth defect causing pollution people were exposed to.

It was by one vote in the House that we started the experiment of banning smoking on flights of one hour or less, and when that turned out to be so successful, we stopped smoking on all flights.

It was also only by one vote that President Clinton got his economic package through Congress in 1993, leading to one of the greatest expansions of the economy in our history.

I mention all of this to impress upon the graduates, and on all of us, that we have the freedom to control our lives.

I want to share with you the story of an old man on the beach, who slowly picked up starfish that washed up after a big storm. He knew that the starfish would die unless put back in the water. When a boy saw him taking one at a time with so many left to do, the boy asked him what difference he could make. The old man told the boy, as he threw another starfish back, “Well, I made a difference to that one.”

Frustration should never keep us from trying, and from helping some even if we could not help all. Pessimists will tell you what can’t be done. But, if you focus too much on what you can’t do, it will interfere with what you can do.

The spirit of renewal is strongest on college campuses. You’ve had the liberty to open your minds to new ideas and the confidence to question old assumptions. As you pursue your careers, I urge you to be energized by the

values that brought you here. Embrace the truth that each of you has the ability to make your mark.

I wish you all the best in the future. And, like your family and friends, I expect great things from you.

